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## External Democracy Promotion in Time of Democratic Crisis. Linkage, Leverage and Domestic Actors' Diversionary Behaviours.

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**Abstract**

Since the 1990s, the literature on External Democracy Promotion (EDP) expanded exponentially. Despite widely supported conclusions on EDP (in)effectiveness in fostering democratization and preventing democratic backsliding are still lacking, this literature have generated sophisticated explanations of these processes. Among them, Levitsky and Way’s (L&W) linkage and leverage theory stands out as one of the most influential. According to Tolstrup, however, their underestimation of domestic agency constitutes a crucial lacuna, which he proposes to fill through the concept of ‘Gatekeeping Elite’ that underlines a significant impact of local actors on the *linkage* dimension and, consequently, on EDP (in)effectiveness. I believe that Tolstrup’s intuition can be further developed, expanding even more the explanatory power of L&W’s theory. I claim that domestic actors may exert a crucial influence also on the *leverage* dimension, thanks to ‘diversionary behaviours’ that local elites may use to change external actors’ interests and preferences, persuading them to limit their democratizing pressures and thus reducing their own vulnerability to EDP processes. To assess the plausibility of this claim, I perform a congruence analysis on the recent and crucial case of autocratization in Serbia (EU candidate country), which is not fully explained by the aforementioned models.

**Key words:**

External Democracy promotion, European Union, Linkage/Leverage, Domestic agency, Serbia, Vučić.

**Introduction**

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3 Since the end of the Cold War, international actors' increased dynamism in promoting  
4 democracy led to an exponential expansion of the literature on External Democracy Promotion  
5 (EDP). Despite widely supported conclusions on whether and to what extent EDP has been  
6 successful are still lacking,<sup>1</sup> the literature has generated sophisticated explanations of these  
7 processes. This subject is even more important today, since democratic backsliding has become  
8 a key challenge:<sup>2</sup> hence, EDP needs to be evaluated also on its capacity to prevent  
9 autocratization.

10  
11 The literature highlighted the impact of numerous factors on EDP (in)effectiveness:  
12 power asymmetry, density of ties and geographical proximity between target states and external  
13 actors;<sup>3</sup> black knights;<sup>4</sup> lack of domestic pro-democratic elites;<sup>5</sup> the democratization-stability  
14 dilemma influencing external actors' choices;<sup>6</sup> stateness and national identity issues,<sup>7</sup> etc.

15  
16 Still struggling to overcome both structure/agency and international/domestic divides,  
17 these studies tend also to underestimate the role of domestic actors in EDP processes, since top-  
18 down approaches treating local elites as passive recipients of external stimuli are still  
19 dominant.<sup>8</sup> Despite recent improvements in the literature, domestic actors' capacity of  
20 influencing these processes is still overlooked.<sup>9</sup> Hence, what explains EDP (in)effectiveness?  
21 Are domestic actors able to play an active and significant role in these processes?

22  
23 Levitsky and Way's<sup>10</sup> (L&W) linkage and leverage theory is among the most influential  
24 attempts to explain EDP (in)effectiveness, since it considers both external/domestic and  
25 agency/structure factors. According to them, the impact of the international dimension on  
26 democracy operates along the two dimensions of linkage and leverage, which are indeed  
27 efficacious in explaining cross-national variations in EDP effectiveness. According to  
28 Tolstrup<sup>11</sup> this theory is incomplete since it fails to account for intra-regional variance among  
29 cases subjected to the same structural environment, due to its underestimation of domestic  
30 agency. With the concept of 'gatekeeping elites,' Tolstrup expands the explanatory power of

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the linkage and leverage theory by showing how local players may significantly influence EDP effectiveness thanks to their capacity of altering the linkage dimension. While I share most of Tolstrup’ findings, I believe that he fails to fully exploit his intuition, since he focuses only on the linkage dimension, overlooking Western leverage. Moreover, Tolstrup does not explain those puzzling cases in which EDP is ineffective despite high, or even increasing, levels of linkage to the West.

To fill this lacuna, I focus on the impact of local elites on Western leverage, which may result from ‘diversionary behaviours’ able to persuade external actors to alter their democratizing pressures. In this way, local elites may exert a significant impact on EDP (in)effectiveness.

To assess the plausibility of this claim, I perform a congruence analysis<sup>12</sup> on the crucial case of Serbia. According to both L&W and Tolstrup EDP should have been effective in this country, since Serbia has enjoyed a high level of both linkage and leverage<sup>13</sup> and its linkage to the EU has even increased during the last decade.<sup>14</sup> However, Serbia’s recent autocratization shows EDP ineffectiveness, which represents a puzzling outcome:<sup>15</sup> neither the gatekeeping function performed by domestic elites (Tolstrup) nor the structural factors identified by L&W appear to explain completely this puzzle. The impact of domestic elites’ diversionary behaviours may help account for EDP ineffectiveness in the Serbian Case, expanding in this way the explanatory power of the linkage and leverage theory and supporting the claim that local agency deserves greater attention in EDP processes.

**Explaining External Democracy Promotion: A Selective Overview of the Literature**

In this article EDP (in)effectiveness is intended in basic terms. Given the presence of an external actor officially committed to foster democratization, or prevent autocratization, in a target state,

the efficacy of these processes is evaluated according to the variations in the level of democracy provided by internationally renowned democracy indexes.

To explain EDP (in)effectiveness the literature focused on structure-related factors, stressing the role of international variables<sup>16</sup> such as power asymmetry, density of ties and geographical proximity between target states and external actors: the stronger, closer and more connected the latter are to the former the greater their capacity of fostering the establishment/consolidation/resilience of democracy.<sup>17</sup> These approaches explain well inter-regional differences in EDP effectiveness. However, they appear excessively deterministic (all cases subjected to similar structural constraints will inevitably follow the same path), and inclined to underestimate agency-related factors in general, and domestic actors in particular. In turn, these weaknesses make them less able to explain intra-regional differences related to cases that do not adhere to the regional pattern.<sup>18</sup>

Other approaches consider agency-related factors, which focus on domestic and international actors' influences on EDP (in)effectiveness: determinacy/credibility of EU conditionality, and domestic adoption costs;<sup>19</sup> black knights;<sup>20</sup> democratization-stability dilemma influencing external actors' choices;<sup>21</sup> strong local pro-democratic elites;<sup>22</sup> powerful domestic anti-democratic players.<sup>23</sup> Despite its noteworthy contribution, this literature does not offer parsimonious explanations of inter-regional differences in EDP efficacy<sup>24</sup> and undervalues domestic elites, privileging international actors;<sup>25</sup> even when local players' relevance is acknowledged top-down approaches picturing them as passive recipient merely reacting to external actors' opportunities/constraints are adopted.<sup>26</sup>

L&W's linkage and leverage theory<sup>27</sup> is among the most influential attempts to explain EDP (in)effectiveness since it considers both external/domestic and structure/agency-related factors.<sup>28</sup> According to L&W, two dimensions are crucial: linkages (the density of ties between the external actor and the targeted state) and leverage (the vulnerability of targeted states to

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external pressures). As Table 1 shows, EDP effectiveness is maximized when both linkage and leverage are high: democracy should be the outcome even in the absence of favourable domestic conditions. The other cases highlight a declining EDP effectiveness and a growing influence of domestic structural factors on regime outcomes.

(TABLE 1 NEAR HERE)

Despite L&W provide a more elegant and far-reaching explanation of Western democracy promotion than many other theorists, they end up stressing the dominant impact of structure-related factors: in fact, they put more emphasis on the linkage dimension, claiming that a dense set of linkages is a crucial condition to convert leverage into influence. Hence, their model presents shortcomings similar to those highlighted for structuralist approaches, particularly the undervaluation of domestic agency.

Tolstrup’s concept of ‘gatekeeping elite’<sup>29</sup> represents an effective way to deal with this lacuna since it brings agency back into L&W’s theory, successfully strengthening its explanatory power. According to L&W, structural factors like geography or history determine the density of linkages. Tolstrup challenges this idea, claiming that domestic elites perform a gatekeeping function through which they condition the level of linkages generated by structural factors and independently develop linkages to external actors. Gatekeeping elites are thus able to initiates, develops, and attempts to reduce ties with international actors, influencing in this way the level of linkages and EDP (in)effectiveness. Thus, Tolstrup can account for the different impact of EDP in Belarus and Ukraine, which the original model fails to explain.

Despite his brilliant contribution, I claim that Tolstrup does not exploit fully his intuition. Dealing only with the impact of domestic agency on linkage, Tolstrup’s argument seems to suffer paradoxically from a structuralist bias since linkage is considered always as the

dominant dimension explaining EDP (in)effectiveness: domestic elites that aim at interfering with the external capacity of influence have to do it *indirectly*, by tuning up or down their linkages with external actors. However, we should acknowledge also the possibility that domestic elites may affect more *directly* international actors' capacity of influence on target states. Moreover, while Tolstrup re-elaborates L&W's theory to account also for cases of external *autocracy* promotion, he does not consider the consolidating phenomenon of democratic backsliding: in fact, both approaches focus on the determinants of EDP (in)effectiveness in transition politics, disregarding cases of (lack of) democratic resilience and the role that EDP actors play in these processes.

My aim here is to build upon Tolstrup's intuition to bring agency back into L&W's theory. To explicate EDP (in)effectiveness and, in particular, domestic actors' impact on it, I claim that next to L&W's structural factors and Tolstrup's gatekeeping elites, we need to focus also on local actors' capacity of manipulating the leverage dimension through the adoption of diversionary behaviours. Hence, a closer look at this dimension is needed.

L&W's<sup>30</sup> conceptualization of Western leverage refers to a country's vulnerability to external pressures, which regards both the bargaining power a state possesses in relation to the West and the potential impact of Western pressures or how harmful they can be for targeted states. L&W identify three factors influencing leverage: 1) size and strength of a country's state and economy (power asymmetry): Western pressures are less effective in structurally strong states; 2) competing Western foreign-policy objectives, or a sort of democratization-stability dilemma influencing external actors' choices: a state's vulnerability is lower when the presence of stability/security issues persuades Western actors to apply weaker democratizing pressures; 3) black knights: foreign powers counterbalancing Western pressures through economic/military/diplomatic aid may decrease the target state's vulnerability to EDP.

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Despite Western leverage appears to deal with domestic agency since it regards the bargaining power of target states and their vulnerability to external pressures, the way it is measured by L&W<sup>31</sup> (Table 2) demonstrates that the real focus is on structural factors and international agency. In fact, strong power asymmetry is the only factor capable of determining a low leverage, and a consequent negative impact on EDP effectiveness, while the two factors regarding international agency (competing foreign-policy objectives and black knights) can, at most, determine a medium leverage and a slightly weaker impact on EDP effectiveness with respect to high leverage.

(TABLE 2 NEAR HERE)

If we add that even international agency factors influencing the level of leverage are operationalized mostly in structural terms, we can acknowledge the limited impact of agency-related factors on L&W's leverage. Moreover, the authors consider this dimension as unidirectional, treating domestic elites as passive recipients of external actors' demands for change and, hence, undervaluing their capacity of influencing leverage and EDP processes. My claim is that domestic actors may have an impact on these processes not only performing a gatekeeping function on linkage (Tolstrup) but also through diversionary behaviours aiming at influencing leverage.

**More Agency in the Linkage and Leverage Theory: Domestic Actors'**  
**Diversionary Behaviours**

The concept of 'diversionary war,' elaborated in the field of international relations,<sup>32</sup> highlights how leaders may use militarized force abroad to distract their publics from domestic issues and regain their support thanks to a rally-around-the-flag effect. The key aspects of this concept



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3 regard a specific action adopted to deflect attention from some kinds of issues and secure the  
4 support of various kinds of actors. Adapting this logic to my subject, I suggest that domestic  
5 leaders will engage in some kind of behaviour intended to distract EDP actors from issues in  
6 the establishment/consolidation/resilience of democratic institutions, and secure their  
7 support/legitimation. More specifically, domestic elites may use diversionary behaviours in  
8 their interactions with international actors, aiming at manipulating the latter's interests and  
9 perceptions, and persuading them to reduce their democratizing pressures: this will, in turn,  
10 lower the level of leverage with a possibly relevant impact on EDP effectiveness. We should  
11 also acknowledge that some forms of diversionary behaviour may be used to strengthen  
12 democratization processes locking countries in democratic clubs (i.e. the Baltic States and the  
13 EU). However, we are going to focus on the opposite path which appears to be far more  
14 common.

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17 How diversionary behaviours affect the factors determining the level of Western  
18 leverage? While structural limits make domestic elites unable to influence power asymmetry  
19 (first factor), and Tolstrup already showed how local actors may enhance their linkages with  
20 black knights (third factor), competing foreign-policy objectives (second factor) may be heavily  
21 influenced by domestic leaders' diversions. According to L&W, only structural factors (i.e.  
22 economic/strategic relevance of targeted states) may generate competing foreign-policy issues  
23 able to persuade external actors to avoid/limit democratizing pressures on target states. Since  
24 the dominant logic behind this factor regards external actors' perceptions about the convenience  
25 of exerting democratizing pressures, I propose an extensive interpretation of the causes leading  
26 to this outcome (Figure 1). A significant impact on external actors' perceptions may emerge  
27 not only from 'real' (L&W) but also from 'potential' competing foreign-policy objectives:  
28 domestic elites' diversionary behaviours, manipulating external actors' perceptions with  
29 respect to the 'potential' relevance of security issues, may be equally effective in persuading  
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international actors to limit their democratizing pressures. In what fallows, I will focus on two types of diversionary behaviour, which does not exclude that other kind of strategies following the same logic may be adopted by domestic actors.

(FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE)

The first diversionary behaviour may be labelled ‘crisis management.’<sup>33</sup> Here, I refer to domestic elites that provoke/manufacture/induce crises they can solve when necessary: for example, triggering and successively de-escalating interethnic violence or tension with neighbouring countries may signal to EDP actors the risk of stability/security issues and, at the same time, highlight the positive role of governing elites as stability providers. Moreover, the same goal can be reached exploiting genuine crises and managing them in a way that enhance domestic elites’ bargaining power vis-à-vis EDP actors. In short, domestic leaders have to deal with the paradox of generating frequent suspensions of ordinary politics through the manufacturing/exploitation of crises while not losing their image of stability providers. The successful establishment of this delicate equilibrium may produces the same impact of genuine security/stability issues in the perceptions of external actors, with the identical outcome of persuading them to limit their democratizing pressures and thus reduce EDP effectiveness. This type of strategy is not new and has characterized Western support for non-democratic regimes around the world for decades.<sup>34</sup> However, it is puzzling in EU candidate countries in which an external actor officially devoted to democracy promotion may end up providing a crucial legitimation to domestic elites that actually jeopardize the democratization process.<sup>35</sup>

The second diversion regards the ‘instrumentalization of black knights,’ which goes beyond both the actual support provided by counter-hegemonic powers to target states (L&W), and the massive strengthening of linkages to these actors by domestic elites (Tolstrup). For

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3 example, threatening to increase their relations with black knights may already help reducing  
4 domestic actors' vulnerability to external pressures. Moreover, a slight increase of these  
5 linkages, which does not reach the needed magnitude to produce the counterbalancing effect  
6 suggested by L&W (at least 1% of GDP) and Tolstrup (to be evaluated case by case in  
7 comparative terms), may pursue the symbolic goal of showing to external actors the risk of an  
8 emerging security issue, which may moderate EDP pressures. Furthermore, domestic actors  
9 may claim to be victims of counter-hegemonic powers' manoeuvrings, leading the West to  
10 show support for governing elite and downplay democratizing pressures.<sup>36</sup>

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12 Since we are focusing on outcomes influenced by strategies that work on external actors'  
13 perceptions, we should stress that other actions adopted by domestic elites may have an impact  
14 of some relevance: however, this would be an indirect influence, a side-effect, if compared with  
15 the two diversionary behaviours presented above. An example comes from the Europeanization  
16 literature regarding partial/selective/fake/pathological compliance of local elites with external  
17 demands,<sup>37</sup> which appeases international actors without producing changes that are sufficiently  
18 meaningful or go in the right direction: the goal is to manipulate external actors' perceptions  
19 signalling domestic elites' good will, which may have as a side-effect to limit their  
20 democratizing pressures.

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22 Although the main goal of this paper is to stress that domestic agency may influence  
23 EDP effectiveness not only through gatekeeping (Tolstrup) but also with diversionary  
24 behaviors, we need to at least address the next question in the causal chain: what factors  
25 favor/hinder the capacity of domestic actors' diversionary behaviors to influence EDP  
26 effectiveness? In what follows, I will touch upon three factors and try to elaborate some  
27 provisional hypotheses, warning that other researches are needed to reach more solid  
28 conclusions.

First, we have to focus on ‘starting conditions,’ assessing the role of L&W’ structural factors, according to which only the evident economic/strategic relevance of a state (i.e. Russia, Saudi Arabia) generates credible competing foreign-policy objectives able to persuade EDP actors to limit their democratizing pressures. However, there are scenarios in which some kind of structural factors exist but they are not objectively sufficient to produce a significant impact on the security/democratization dilemma of EDP actors: while L&W’s interpretation regards conditions that are already in place these scenarios may refer, for example, to credible security/stability crises that may or may not emerge, according to the behavior of involved actors. In these cases, domestic elites may adopt diversions to increase the credibility of structural factors. Hence, we may attempt to propose the following hypothesis: diversionary behaviors will be more likely to be more effective in influencing EDP processes when they can build upon something real, like an old inter-state war that can be restarted, a migration wave that can be unleashed, the existence of a foreign power capable and willing to perform a black knight function, etc. ~~Using the same logic, it is quite unlikely to instrumentalize black knights if a foreign power with the features/willingness to perform a black knight function is not present.~~

The second factor is related to the ‘type and strength of domestic actors.’ It is more likely to have effective diversions when ruling elites are the dominant actor in their socio-political system, because of the greater control they can exert on state resources and apparatus, the stronger capacity to involve the population in support of their strategies, the lack of domestic alternatives for international actors, etc. Stronger ruling elites are better equipped to show EDP actors unity, capacity to act and momentum, which may be crucial for the credibility of diversionary behaviors. In terms of type, according to their commitment to democracy I distinguish three groups of domestic actors: democratic resisters, instrumental democrats, and full democrats. While the features of the first and the last type are intuitive, instrumental

democrats represent actors that do not formally contest democracy but operate to hollow it informally/gradually. I claim that instrumental democrats are better equipped to implement more effective diversionary behaviors, because less likely to trigger a strong reaction from EDP actors, as it would be for democratic resisters, and more willing to implement diversions if compared to full democrats. Hence, the following hypothesis may be formulated: diversionary behaviors are more likely to be effective when implemented by strong instrumental democrats.

A third factor regards a possible ‘weakness of EDP actors.’ Here, I do not refer to fundamental changes in the power asymmetry between EDP actors and target states; rather, there are phenomena that may weaken/distract international actors (i.e. an intense economic crisis), influencing their determination in pursuing EDP processes. Such situations may make diversions more effective since international actors could be less willing to take even the risk of allowing yet another problem to emerge. A final hypothesis, thus, emerges: diversionary behaviors have more chances to be effective when EDP actors are weakened or distracted by other issues.

To ~~resume~~<sup>conclude</sup>, strong instrumental democrats, building on favorable starting conditions and dealing with weakened international actors, will have more chances to put in place credible diversionary behaviors, with a greater impact on the security/democratization dilemma, the leverage dimension and EDP effectiveness.

To assess the plausibility of this proposal, I adopt the congruence analysis method.<sup>38</sup> This approach aims at linking empirical observations back to a more abstract theoretical framework, with the goal of evaluating its explanatory powers vis-à-vis other competing frameworks. The selection of Serbia is perfectly congruent with this methodological approach. In fact, case selection for congruence analysis does not look for variation among or within cases; it is, instead, theory-driven, and it suggests to select crucial cases that are expected to conform to the dominant theory.<sup>39</sup> I maintain that Serbia is relevant as a case study for several reasons.

From a theoretical perspective, Serbia, according to L&W's theory and analysis,<sup>40</sup> is a most likely case of effective EDP since it enjoyed a high level of linkage and leverage: hence, external democracy promoters should be able to foster the establishment/resilience of democratic institutions even in presence of unfavourable domestic conditions, implying that local elites are barely relevant. However, Serbia recently autocratized,<sup>41</sup> showing how the EDP was ineffective. Moreover, according to Tolstrup this EDP failure should be the result of local elites tuning down linkages to the West. However, the Serbian elite managed to increase the already high linkage with the EU. Hence, Serbia appears to contradict, at least in part, both L&W and Tolstrup's assumptions/predictions regarding the determinants of EDP (in)effectiveness. From a practical point of view, Serbia is a frontrunner among the current EU candidate countries and intrinsically relevant due to its key role for the stability of the Balkans.<sup>42</sup>

## **EU Democracy Promotion and Serbia's Autocratization: Diversions at Work**

The purpose of this section is to offer a selective overview of EDP in Serbia and exemplify the important role domestic actors' diversionary behaviors may have in influencing EDP effectiveness, not to thoroughly analyze the trajectory of Serbian democratization, nor to fully explain its autocratization process.

Slobodan Milošević and his Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) dominated Serbian politics during the 1990s, establishing a Competitive Authoritarian (CA) regime thanks also to little Western pressures, originated from Milošević's perceived utility in solving the Balkan wars, which led to a temporarily ineffective EDP.<sup>43</sup>

The Kosovo war (1998-99) led Western powers to exert an enormous pressure on Milošević, through direct military intervention (1999) and constant support to Serbian oppositions, which were persuaded to merge into the Democratic Opposition of Serbia

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3 (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS). Consequently, DOS won the 2000 elections with its most  
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5 representative leaders becoming President of the Republic (Vojislav Koštunica, Democratic  
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7 Party of Serbia, *Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS) and Prime Minister (Zoran Đinđić,  
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9 Democratic Party, *Demokratska stranka*, DS).<sup>44</sup>  
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12 During the 2000s, several DOS governments struggled only to establish a defective  
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14 democracy in Serbia. This fragile political system survived under the threat of Vojislav Šešelj's  
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16 far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS), which became the largest  
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18 party in Serbia, and led Western pressures to be consistent throughout the 2000s. Since the  
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20 Zagreb European council (2000), Serbia has been involved in the EU integration process. The  
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22 negotiation for the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) started in 2005 but were  
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24 called off in 2006 due to Serbia's lack of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal  
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26 of Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Fearing that the country might turn to extremist platforms (i.e.  
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28 SRS), the EU in concomitance with the 2007 parliamentary elections assured that SAA  
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30 negotiations would be resumed after the new government was formed, which was actually done  
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32 without any concrete change in Serbia's attitude toward the ICTY. To favour the re-election of  
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34 the pro-EU president Boris Tadić (DS) in the 2008 presidential elections, the European  
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36 Commission announced in November 2007 the finalization of the SAA. With the same goal of  
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38 boosting the electoral chances of pro-EU parties, just few weeks before the 2008 parliamentary  
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40 elections the EU signed the SAA with Serbia.<sup>45</sup> With the arrest in 2011 of the last war criminals  
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42 Mladić and Hadzic, the cooperation with the ICTY lost its influence on Serbia-EU relations.  
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44 Hence, Kosovo surged as the major issue in this process, even more so due to its 2008 unilateral  
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46 declaration of independence. In fact, the next key step of the Serbian integration process  
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48 (candidate status) was granted to reward the DS government, which had agreed to participate  
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50 in the EU-sponsored dialogue process with Kosovo authorities and had promised to allow its  
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52 former province to participate in regional organizations.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, this reward came again  
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just few months before the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, presumably with the intent to boost the electoral chances of pro-EU parties.

After his defeat in the 2008 presidential elections, the SRS leader Tomislav Nikolić left his party and founded the formally more moderate and pro-EU Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS).<sup>47</sup> Thanks also to this change, Nikolić won the 2012 presidential elections and Aleksandar Vučić, the new SNS leader, became vice-prime minister through a post-electoral coalition with the SPS. Hence, former Milošević's associates were back in power.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fears of many in the EU, this government committed itself to EU accession and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. In fact, in 2012 Iвица Dačić became the first Serbian prime minister to meet with its Kosovan counterpart Hashim Thaci. Moreover, in 2013 Serbia and Kosovo signed an historic agreement, the 'First (Brussels) Agreement,' which outlined the trajectory of future negotiations.<sup>49</sup> Serbia was rewarded with the official start of membership negotiations in 2014.<sup>50</sup>

Snap elections called in 2014 recorded the definitive collapse of former ruling parties (i.e. DS, DSS) and the fragmentation of the opposition, giving the SNS-SPS coalition the largest parliamentary majority in Serbian history (eighty percent).<sup>51</sup> Vučić became prime minister, also winning the 2016 elections and becoming President of the Republic in 2017.<sup>52</sup> Since the starting of membership negotiations, Serbia was rewarded with the opening of sixteen out of thirty-five chapters, with two of them provisionally closed. Chapter 35 on 'other issues,' which included the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations, was the first to be opened on 14 December 2015, clearly highlighting how this issue was the top EU priority. Today, Serbia is the frontrunner among the EU candidate countries, as explicitly stated by the former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, which in November 2017 declared the following: "I really think that Serbia and Montenegro will be members of the EU before 2025."<sup>53</sup>



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3 Despite these (slow) progresses, which stress a high and growing level of Serbia-EU  
4 linkages, the state of democracy in this country is disappointing. As the V-DEM Regime of the  
5 World Index shows (Figure 2), Serbian democracy fell rapidly back into competitive  
6 authoritarianism soon after Vučić's rise to premiership in 2014.<sup>54</sup> This decoupling between the  
7 progresses in the EU integration process and the deterioration of democracy seems sufficient to  
8 claim that the EU EDP in Serbia was ineffective.  
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19 (FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE)  
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24 Which factors favoured this EDP failure? Following Tolstrup's perspective, it should  
25 have been the result of a significant variation in the linkage dimension, with gatekeeping elites  
26 reducing ties with the West and increasing them with black knights. However, this explanation  
27 does not fit with the Serbian case, in which linkages to the West were even strengthened and  
28 the small improvements in Serbia's linkages with Russia and China were not of the needed  
29 magnitude to allow them to perform a meaningful black knight function.  
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38 Regarding L&W, their key dimension of linkage is high: their own analysis confirm this  
39 evaluation until 2008<sup>55</sup> and the deepening of the accession process briefly touched upon above  
40 is sufficient to classify the Serbian linkage to the West as high also in the 2010s. Regarding  
41 Western leverage, L&W's analysis of this case classify leverage in Serbia as high during the  
42 2000s.<sup>56</sup> However, if competing foreign-policy issues are present their measurement system  
43 downgrade leverage to a medium level. This appear to be the case in Serbia during the 2010s  
44 since progresses in the accession process have been granted as rewards for improvements in  
45 security issues (Kosovo) and despite the evident and parallel erosion of democracy. According  
46 to L&W, a high level of both linkage and leverage should produce an effective EDP, able to  
47 bring democratization even in the absence of favourable domestic conditions. Since leverage is  
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medium in Serbia we should have foreseen a moderately effective EDP and a slow but steady democratization. Hence, EDP ineffectiveness does not seem to be explained by L&W. I should acknowledge that these Authors stress how particularly strong factors may lead to ineffective EDP even in presence of other favourable conditions. Serbia during the 1990s provides such an example since a temporarily ineffective EDP was generated by competing security issues (Milošević's perceived utility in solving the Balkan wars).<sup>57</sup> However, such intense situation was absent in Serbia during the 2010s since the considerable improvements in the Kosovo-Serbia relations had largely softened objective security issues in the region. In conclusion, if competing foreign-policy objectives led the EU to favour stability over democratization and, thus, contributed to an ineffective EDP, L&W's structural factors responsible for the emergence of this factor (economic/strategic relevance of the target state) do not seem to explain completely this outcome.

In what follows, I will argue that diversionary behaviours implemented by Serbian elites need to be included among the factors explaining EDP ineffectiveness in this case. Thanks also to these behaviours, the new Serbia elite seems to have succeeded in establishing a delicate equilibrium in which the EU has been persuaded to accept small and incomplete gains in the security dimension (Kosovo) in exchange for improvements in the accession process and a blatant disregard for the growing authoritarian tendencies recently emerged in Serbia.

The first diversionary behaviour, labelled 'crisis management',<sup>58</sup> regards domestic leaders establishing a delicate equilibrium between their image of stability providers and the need to ensure that there is continued instability so that external actors can be persuaded to focus on this issue rather than on democracy erosion. In this regard, Kosovo constitutes a perfect example.<sup>59</sup> On one hand, the new elite entered into the EU-sponsored dialogue with Kosovan authorities, which led to the historic signing of the Brussels Agreement and persuaded the EU to consider Vučić as more effective in providing stability if compared with previous pro-EU

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3 governments. Symbolic gestures as Vučić's attendance in Srebrenica in 2015 reinforced his  
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5 image as stability provider.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, the SNS instrumentalized this issue to keep a  
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7 certain level of instability, which helped the ruling party to divert EU's attention from its  
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9 inaction regarding necessary democratic reforms.<sup>61</sup> For example, in 2015 Serbia blocked  
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11 Kosovo from gaining UNESCO membership. Moreover, in 2017 Serbian authorities sent a train  
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13 to northern Kosovo bearing the words 'Kosovo is Serbia' in twenty-one languages.<sup>62</sup> The train  
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15 was in due time stopped from entering Kosovo by Vučić. This was followed by provocative  
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17 rhetoric from President Nikolić regarding military threat, while Vučić took a more conciliatory  
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19 tone. The incident thus served to highlight the threat of conflict, while also allowing Vučić to  
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21 portray himself as a source of stability, which is indeed how the EU perceives him.<sup>63</sup>  
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23 Furthermore, in 2018 Marko Đurić, head of the Serbian government's Kosovo office, was  
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25 arrested by the Kosovo police due to his illegal entry in the former Serbian province. As Kosovo  
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27 authorities explained, Đurić had been earlier banned from entering Kosovo.<sup>64</sup> In the aftermath  
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29 of the incident, Vučić used excessively inflammatory language by calling the Kosovo police a  
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31 "terrorist gang" and defining Kosovo a 'bandit' country; he blamed also the EU and specifically  
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33 said that the Brussels Agreement had been undermined.<sup>65</sup>  
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40 Another way to implement these kind of diversions regards the exploitation of genuine  
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42 crises, which may contribute to persuade EDP actors to limit democratizing pressures. The  
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44 migration crisis erupted in the 2010s constitutes a clear example. In September 2015, during  
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46 the height of the European migration crisis, Vučić commented on the EU's and Serbia's role in  
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48 managing the influx of asylum-seekers, stressing how Serbia adopted a more humanitarian  
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50 approach if compared with other EU states, and declaring that he was willing to receive  
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52 migrants even if Serbia was not yet an EU member state: 'This makes us more European than  
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54 some Member States. We don't build walls.'<sup>66</sup> We should not consider this approach as plain  
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56 humanism deprived of political interests. On one hand, Serbia had an easier task: the refugees  
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entering its territory usually had the only goal to leave it as soon as possible. On the other hand, this approach, especially if compared with the fences built by Hungary (an EU member state) on the Serbian border, strengthened Vučić's image as stability provider, achieving political points with the EU also in terms of Serbia's accession process. This kind of diversionary behaviour helped the new Serbian elite to divert the EU attention from its inaction regarding necessary democratic reforms in areas such as the rule of law and media freedoms,<sup>67</sup> persuading them to focus more on security issues and, at the same time, establishing themselves as the best security providers on the ground.<sup>68</sup> This conclusion is shared by both EU and domestic actors: for example, an official of the European External Action Service interviewed in November 2017<sup>69</sup> acknowledged that the desire to resolve the disputed status of Kosovo persuaded EU and member state officials to play along, disregarding Serbia's problematic rule of law record for the sake of progress in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina; at the domestic level, Vukašin Obradović, President of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), in 2016 argued that 'EU officials have a quite tolerant attitude towards Aleksandar Vučić and the way that he treats the media. This is because EU officials are not interested in the media so long as Vučić fulfils his main political tasks relating to the Kosovo agreement, regional stability and other strategic issues.'<sup>70</sup> In fact, despite serious concerns regarding media freedom in Serbia expressed by NGOs and international organizations, in 2015 the EU Commissioner for European enlargement Johannes Hahn questioned the validity of claims about self-censorship and media freedom issues, demanding to focus more on real evidence than rumours.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, several European leaders have provided support and legitimation to Vučić, some of them being very clear about their motivations. For example, in 2016 the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, described him as an 'anchor of stability.'<sup>72</sup> Angela Merkel met with the Serbian leader ten times in three years, even in crucial moments:<sup>73</sup> just few weeks before the 2017 presidential elections she conceded to Vučić a meeting in Berlin,<sup>74</sup> which was recognised by

Vučić himself who, after the victory, thanked Merkel for meeting him so close to the elections;<sup>75</sup> only days before the publication of the EU's 2018 rather critical report on Serbia's progress towards EU accession, Merkel praised Vučić's 'very good reform record' in a joint press conference.<sup>76</sup> During his visit to Serbia in April 2018, the European Council President Tusk hailed Vučić as a 'soul mate' and 'strong patriot.'<sup>77</sup> Finally, despite his growingly evident authoritarian tendencies Vučić has been rewarded with the opening of numerous chapters in the EU negotiation process, which were used to strengthen his domestic legitimation and his grip on power.<sup>78</sup>

The second diversionary behaviour that helped Serbian elites to emphasize artificially security issues, contributing to divert EU's attention from democracy erosion, regards the 'instrumentalization of black knights.'<sup>79</sup> Despite China is gaining relevance in this respect,<sup>80</sup> relations with Russia represent the key example. Several factors demonstrate that Serbia-Russia relations have recently intensified, due also to the Russian interest in preventing NATO/EU expansions in the Balkans. Shared Slav and Orthodox roots between the two countries,<sup>81</sup> the Serbian anti-NATO sentiment<sup>82</sup> and Moscow's opposition to the independence of Kosovo<sup>83</sup> facilitated this intensified relation. Serbian elites cultivated their relationship with Russia in several ways: in 2013 Serbia accepted an emergency loan from Russia, and another for the renovation of the railways;<sup>84</sup> the purchase by Gazprom of the refinery in Nis was favoured;<sup>85</sup> Belgrade refused to implement the European sanctions against Russia for the illegal annexation of Crimea;<sup>86</sup> six second-hand Mig 29s and other military equipment were donated by Moscow in 2017;<sup>87</sup> joint military exercises with Russia and Belarus were held since 2015; Serbia always refused to join NATO, preferring to remain military neutral; its leaders (i.e. Vučić, Dačić) made regular visits to Moscow; etc.

It is important not to overestimate this intensification of linkages between Serbia and Russia, since they do not reach the needed magnitude to exert the functions foreseen by L&W

(Russian's aid remains below 1% of GDP and is by far less consistent than that provided by the EU) and Tolstrup (linkages with the EU have been strengthened): to this day, just as one example, the EU buys ten times as many Serbian exports as Russia does, and Vučić is well aware of that.<sup>88</sup> However, it seems that this new dynamism in Moscow-Belgrade relations was sufficient to allow the new Serbian elite to exploit it in its relationship with the EU. In fact, this issue and the migration crisis are the main reasons behind the 'Berlin Process' launched by Merkel in 2014.<sup>89</sup> This diplomatic effort, which consisted in the organization of one international meeting every year, had the general goal to re-engage the EU in the Balkans, without dealing, however, with any democracy issue in countries like Serbia. Moreover, in 2017 the French President Macron declared that the EU should 'open up to the countries of the Balkans ... it is a condition for them not to turn their backs on Europe and move either towards Russia or Turkey or towards authoritarian powers which do not defend our values.'<sup>90</sup> It is, then, possible to agree with Bieber<sup>91</sup> when he claims that Serbian ties to Russia are instrumentalized by Belgrade to keep the EU to focus on geopolitical stability and adopt a more lenient approach on democratic reforms.

I finally touch upon the conditions that may have helped diversionary behaviours to influence EDP effectiveness in Serbia during the last decade. Three factors, -and related provisional hypotheses, have been identified: starting conditions, type and strength of domestic elites, and weakness of EDP actors. All of them are present and significant in the Serbian case. As stressed above, there were solid bases on which the Serbian elite could build its diversionary behaviours: the Yugoslav wars fought between 1991 and 1995; the 1999 Kosovo war; the ethnic/religious/historical linkages between Serbia and Russia. In fact, the crisis management diversion during the 2010s was built mainly around the Kosovo issue and, despite an increased activism of Turkey and China in the Balkans, the instrumentalization of black knight diversion

was centred on Serbia-Russia relations: both of them were evaluated as credible security issues by EU actors, which implemented a less effective EDP also because of these issues.

The second factor regarding the type and strength of domestic actors was also present and relevant. We saw how the SNS became soon the dominant actor of the system, winning several consecutive elections with large margins. Moreover, Vučić and the SNS can be classified as instrumental democrats: while they pragmatically moderated the extremist views of the SRS, adopting a formal pro-EU platform, their Euroenthusiasm was instrumental, ‘the result of electoral tactics to come to power, secure political future and obtain “European legitimacy.”’<sup>92</sup> These factors proved to be effective in helping Vučić to acquire the EU legitimacy described above: his dominant position, which left no alternatives on the ground, and his instrumental approach, which allowed him to mix contradictory moves in terms of security/stability and democratization, led EDP actors to accept him as the only possible interlocutor, increasing the credibility and effectiveness of his diversionary strategies.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, we can also stress the presence of the third factor related to the possible weakness of EDP actors. As we have briefly described above, during the 2000s the EU was effective in keeping Serbia on a democratic path while also managing to show strength in dealing with security issues (compliance with the ICTY demands). During the 2010s, the consequences of several crises emerged powerfully: the ‘Euro’ crisis, the enlargement fatigue, the migration crisis, the rise of illiberal regimes within the EU, etc. These factors worked well to weaken the EU and its credibility in pursuing some of the goals directly involving Serbia, as the enlargement program and the oversight of the democratization process. In this situation, the effectiveness of Serbian diversions may have been enhanced by the EU unwillingness to deal with yet another crisis in the Balkans, whether in the form of inter-ethnic conflicts or of a greater Russian influence in the region.



In conclusion, the provisional hypotheses seem to hold at least of the Serbian case since the presence of strong instrumental democrats represented by Vučić and the SNS, which could build upon objective security issues as the history of inter-ethnic violence and the special relationship with Russia, and had the chance to deal with a weakened EU, may constitute the major factors explaining the capacity of diversionary behaviours to influence EDP effectiveness in the Serbian case.

## Conclusion

The goal of this article was to engage in the debate on the determinants of EDP effectiveness, dealing with agency/structure and domestic/international divides, and focusing on the major shortcoming present in this literature which is the little consideration for the active role of domestic actors in these processes. Hence, I focused on L&W's linkage and leverage theory, which represents one of the most promising attempts to bridge these divides, following also Tolstrup's intuition according to which bringing agency back into this framework would increase its capacity to explain EDP effectiveness. Borrowing a concept elaborated in the field of international relations, I tried to build upon L&W and Tolstrup focusing on domestic actors' diversionary behaviours thanks to which they may succeed in exerting a significant influence on leverage and, consequently, on EDP effectiveness.

The empirical analysis has shown these kinds of diversionary mechanisms at work in a case that neither L&W nor Tolstrup could explain satisfactorily. In fact, adopting the latter's perspective we could have expected to see the new Serbian elite trying to reduce its linkages with the EU to limit the capacity of this external actor to hold them accountable for their authoritarian attitude. Instead, and counterintuitively, the new Serbian elite worked hard to gain EU's support and legitimation through an active involvement in the normalization of relations with Kosovo and pushing forward Serbia's integration process. Diversionary behaviours have



represented a key tool for domestic actors to manage this paradox, since these strategies allowed them to gain the benefits of a stronger relation with the EU without paying the price of greater accountability: diverting external actors' attention from democracy to security issues allowed Vučić to simultaneously reduce EU democratizing pressures and trigger the autocratization process. As a result, the EU found itself in the paradoxical position of officially supporting both democracy promotion and anti-democratic actors in an EU candidate country.

With regard to L&W, if they acknowledge that particularly strong factors in the leverage dimension may prevent an effective EDP even in presence of other favourable conditions like a high linkage, they highlight that these factors are influenced preponderantly by structural causes. In fact, according to them the presence of competing foreign-policy objectives is explained by the economic/strategic relevance of the target state. The Serbian case demonstrated that diversionary behaviours might have a significant influence on external actors' perceptions and interests, leading them to overemphasize security issues that are not fully justified by the actual situation on the ground. Hence, domestic elites may manipulate the way structural factors are evaluated by external actors: through these strategies, then, they may succeed in persuading international actors to reduce their democratizing pressures and, consequently, to decrease leverage to a level that produce a negative impact on EDP effectiveness.

In conclusion, domestic elites' diversionary behaviour represent a significant factor worth of being integrated in L&W's framework since, as Tolstrup's concept of gatekeeping elites, it enlarges its capacity to explain intra-regional differences in EDP effectiveness and it strengthens its overall explanatory power.

Some further considerations are due. First, these findings support the claim that local agency deserves greater attention in EDP processes: without both local and international actors pushing toward the same direction EDP can hardly be effective. Second, future researches

should also focus on those factors able to affect diversions' capacity to manipulate the leverage dimension and impact on EDP effectiveness. Finally, what emerges from the Serbian experience, which strengthens a pessimistic perspective about the future of democracy, is an intended/induced shift in the policy preferences of international democracy promoters, which are increasingly privileging security issues to democratization even in unexpected cases, making these actors less and less effective in dealing with the phenomenon of democratic backsliding.

### Notes

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13. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*
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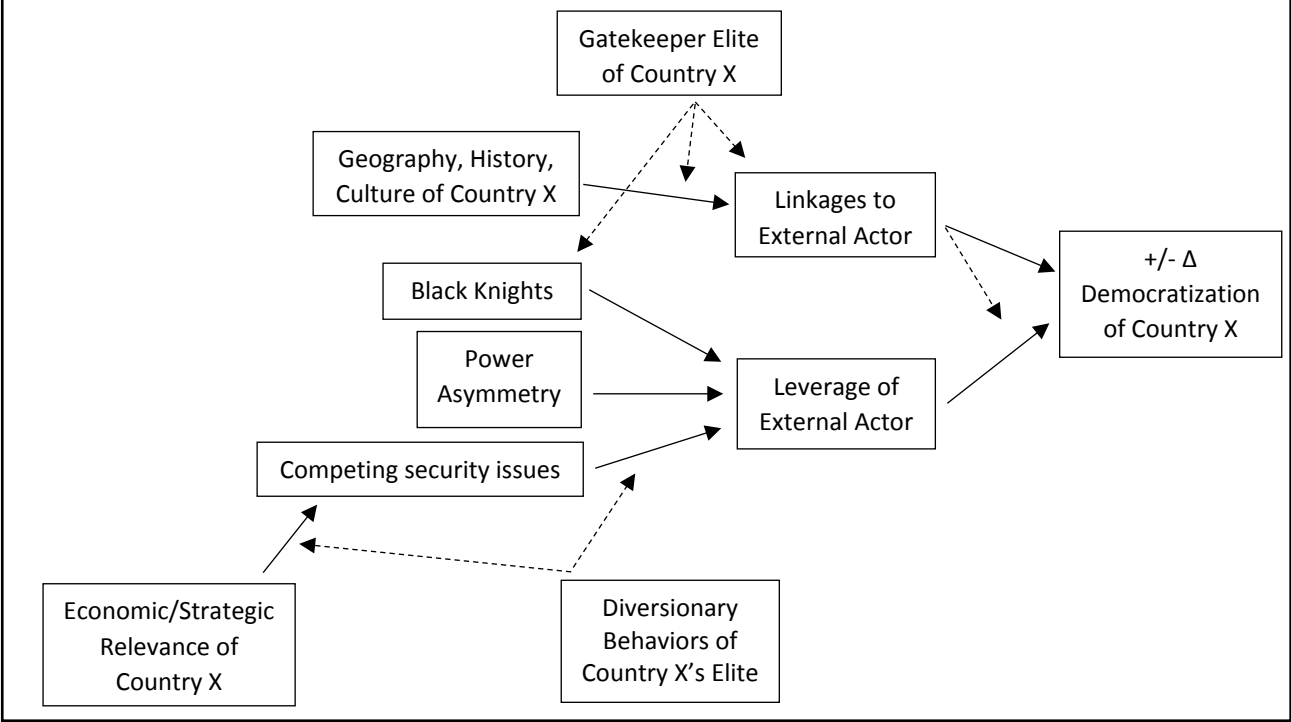


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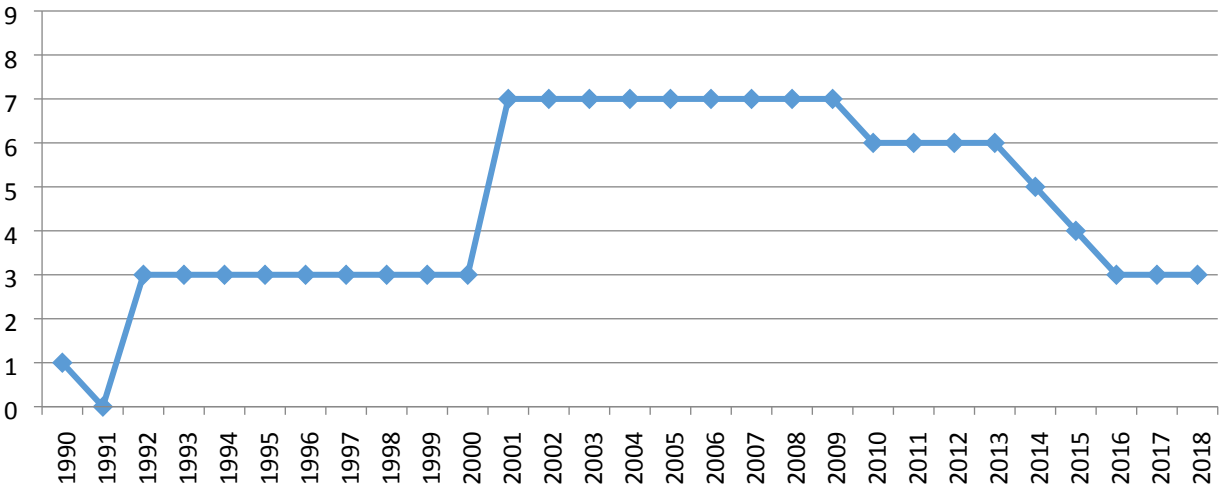
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Figure 1. How domestic elites can influence EDP effectiveness in the linkage and leverage theory



Source: Author's elaboration on the ground of a Tolstrup's figure (2013, 721).

Figure 2. Regime of the World Index, with lower and upper bound categories. Serbia 1990-2018



Source: [www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net), dataset Version 9.

Note: closed autocracy (0); closed autocracy upper bound (1); electoral autocracy lower bound (2); electoral autocracy (3); electoral autocracy upper bound (4); electoral democracy lower bound (5); electoral democracy (6); electoral democracy upper bound (7); liberal democracy lower bound (8); liberal democracy (9).

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Table 1. How variation in linkage and leverage shapes external pressure for democratization

	High Linkage	Low Linkage
High Leverage	Consistent and intense democratizing pressure	Often strong, but intermittent and “electoralist,” pressure
Low Leverage	Consistent but diffuse and indirect democratizing pressure	Weak external pressure

Source: Levitsky and Way (2010: 53).

For Peer Review

Table 2. Levitsky and Way's measurement of Western leverage

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Low leverage	Cases that meet at least one of the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Large Economy</li><li>• Major Oil Producer</li><li>• Possession of/capacity to use nuclear weapons</li></ul>
Medium leverage	Cases that meet none of the criteria for low leverage but meet at least one of the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Medium-Sized Economy</li><li>• Secondary Oil Producer</li><li>• Competing Security Issues</li><li>• Beneficiary of Black Knight Assistance</li></ul>
High leverage	Cases that meet none of the criteria for low or medium leverage

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Source: Levitsky and Way (2010, 372-373).